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M E M O R A N D U M

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FROM: Congressman Les Aspin

DATE: July 1, 1988

RE: Legislation beneficial to Israel

Congress is just completing action on the annual defense bill, which contained more than a dozen items of interest and concern to Israel. Several items in the original bill were actually detrimental to Israel -- such as ones that would have made it harder for Israeli firms to compete freely for American defense contracts. I am happy to report that every one of those discriminatory amendments has been stripped from the final version of the bill that is about to be sent to the President.

Other key changes in the bill will help Israel compete to sell its Arrow anti-tactical missile to the United States. Israel has been the leader in this field because Soviet-made tactical (i.e., short-range) missiles in Syrian hands are such a threat to Israeli cities and military installations. Israel has been pressing ahead with work on the Arrow -- a system that would clearly be much more cost-effective if Israel could sell it to the United States.

Over the years, I have promoted increased military cooperation between the United States and Israel, advocating sales of much more than just the Arrow. But a whole series of frictions, foibles and embarrassments have erupted. To try to put an end to them, I sponsored an amendment this year that tells the Pentagon to set up a procurement liaison office in Israel. Having a body of expertise resident in Israel should help eliminate the administrative booboos that have bedeviled the relationship. But the office can do much more. I want its staffers to be on the lookout for Israeli products and concepts that can help our own defense effort. There is no reason why American scientists and technicians should duplicate the excellent work of the many defense scientists and technicians in Israel.

Another section of the bill deals with Israel's legal status as a "major non-NATO ally" of the United States. Two years ago, I wrote and introduced the language that created that status. As originally enacted, Israel has to be declared a "major non-NATO ally" annually; it wasn't a permanent status. This year's defense bill makes the major non-NATO ally provision a permanent one.

Finally, I am enclosing the text of a speech I delivered as keynoter at AIPAC's 29th Annual Policy Conference this year. In it, I discuss the development of the Israeli-American strategic relationship, explain what's unique about it, and describe the whys and wherefores of the frictions in the relationship -- frictions that won't go away.

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EXEC
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Rep. Les Aspin
SPEECH TEXT
AIPAC 29th Annual Policy Conference
Washington, D.C.
Sunday, May 15, 1988

Introduction

A review of newspaper headlines would tell you that U.S.-Israeli relations soar and plummet to astounding heights and depths. The headlines, however, introduce a distortion. As the old newspaper adage explains, dog-bites-man does not a story make; what the media seeks is the man-bites-dog story.

The man-bites-dog headlines we tend to live by show dramatic ups and downs.

Camp David: president and prime minister hug one another; all is wonderful.

Another time: Annexation of the Golan Heights: Washington irate; relations plummet.

These are dramatic swings. We rave at the closeness; then we rage at the frictions.

But foreign affairs operate at a level other than headlines. Most of our relations with foreign countries never make headlines.

And below the headline level, there has been an undramatic but steady and very important evolution in the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship. If I were to sum it up in bumper sticker terms, I would say that our relations were formerly of the heart alone, but are now of the head and heart together.

History of the relationship

Let me run through a little history of the evolution in our strategic relationship.

The first period -- roughly covering the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations -- was characterized in the United States by deep sympathy for Israel and a sense of moral responsibility.

There was great public support for Israel, an outpouring of emotion, affection, sympathy, and vocal support for little David facing the Arab Goliath. But official Washington emphasized evenhandedness. Official Washington did not wish to offend the Arabs and insisted on keeping considerable distance between the United States and Israel. Arms sales? No, we were happy to leave that to De Gaulle. The Navy made no port visits to Israel. Israel's leaders made no state visits to Washington. However, even from the beginning, there was a significant official relationship, though much of it was out of sight since it was based on a community of interest between the two intelligence services.

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But never mind the twisted analysis. The result of Reagan's analysis was to strengthen the U.S.-Israeli relationship. One can fault him for doing it for the wrong reasons -- that is, to shaft Moscow rather than to help Israel. But regardless of the motivations, the product was a dramatic one.

The State Department wasn't all that overjoyed. It still held the view that we had a commitment to Israel's survival and that was all that mattered for Israel. So why complicate relations with the Arabs by adding port visits and joint military exercises and the like. They also argued that talk of a strategic relationship was meaningless because Israel was too small to do anything for us in return.

Four key developments overruled the naysayers and brought about the changes of the 1980s.

First, Ronald Reagan did want closer ties and did not want to read memos that advised otherwise.

Second, the Iranian revolution and the Carter doctrine expanded the American role in the region and necessitated closer ties to the one stable, reliable, and militarily capable nation in the region.

Third, the terrorism threat was growing and Israel was one of the few countries with any idea of how to cope with it.

Fourth, closer ties -- of both the head and the heart -- were a natural byproduct of Camp David.

So, what have we seen in the 1980s? A lot. We've signed three formal agreements with Israel. The President has issued a National Security Decision Directive that establishes a Joint Political-Military Group. Port visits have developed apace. We now have joint military exercises. We have authorized the prepositioning of U.S. military equipment in Israel for use in an emergency. Israeli hospitals are prepared to accept American casualties -- and all the details, pinpointing helicopter landing pads and the specific skills of individual hospitals, have been worked out. Israel has been declared under the law to be a major non-NATO ally of the United States. Purchases of Israeli-made equipment by the U.S. military have grown about 20-fold. A lot has happened to cement the relationship -- to build a relationship of the head as well as the heart.

Uniqueness of relationship compared to other allies

The obvious question is where does it all go from here. Over the years, Israel has become more and more of an ally, although there is not yet a formal alliance.

It is interesting to compare our ties to Israel with our ties to those countries with which we do have a formal alliance, like those of NATO. When we just focus on the U.S.-Israel relationship, we can be troubled by the strains and frictions. But our relations with our formal allies are certainly bedeviled by many strains and frictions.

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The reason is simple. Most Arabs thought the United States had cemented close military ties with Israel in 1948; the port visits and joint exercises didn't sound like anything new to an Arab who thought the American and Israeli militaries were already virtually one and the same.

I think every objective observer would now have to admit an important lesson from this experience. We were simply too cautious and imagined Arab sensitivities that didn't exist. If we are going to have a workable policy in the Arab world, we must do better than that in understanding the Arab world.

Now, let me summarize our relations with Europe as compared to our relations with Israel. This is what it looks like:

Focusing on Europe, we do not have serious problems within the region because we have shared interests within the region. While we contend over nuance and degree, we are united on holding back the Soviet Union. But in the greater world, we are not united. The Europeans have other interests around the world -- interests that often conflict with ours in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

Focusing on Israel, the picture is reversed. The positives become negatives and the negatives become positives. We have interests in the region that sometimes conflict with Israel's. But in the larger world, there is rarely a conflict. Israel sees its larger interests served if American interests elsewhere in the world are not undermined and American capabilities not drained away.

Where do we go from here?

So, where do we go from here?

Clearly, I do not see much threat to our relationship -- to the underlying, long-term relationship. I do see glitches galore. The West Bank settlements. Arms sales to the Persian Gulf states. The Golan annexation. But these are glitches. They cause pain and give one or the other -- or both of us -- some stomach distress. But they don't alter the basic framework of enduring interests.

Some say that the next step in our relationship is a full-fledged formal alliance. Most recognize, however, that this won't come about until there is a comprehensive peace settlement.

Caution needs to be followed here. An alliance could make Israel more like a traditional ally. If we had a defense treaty with all its accoutrements, would our relationship be bedeviled by hassles over burdensharing? Would Israel no longer feel a need to support U.S. interests in the farflung corners of the world? Or, given the Taiwan experience, would Israel suffer doubts about a guarantee that it doesn't now want or need to rely on? It's an interesting possibility worth thinking about.

Nevertheless, the fact is: a genuine peace supported by real security guarantees remains the premier goal -- the shared goal -- of Israel and the United States. It is only important to recognize that an alliance is not the answer to -- and will not end -- all our problems.

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One ally told us we couldn't overfly its territory to reach Libya. Another ally, whose capital city residents are unhappy at the noise made by our F-16s, is making us close our base there. Still others do not wish to cooperate with us in the Persian Gulf, even while we help assure their fuel supplies. And others are saying our ships can't visit unless we say they carry no nuclear weapons.

Those are all vexing problems that cause a great deal of perspiration to flow in the corridors of the State Department and the Pentagon. Yet, no one I know in the U.S. government is suggesting that we bury the NATO alliance.

To be sure, we have some workaday frictions with Israel. But we shouldn't hold the Israeli-American alliance to a higher standard than our other alliances.

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